FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

One tribal nation we know of recently launched a new approach to developing its workforce in several fields where its labor needs are greatest. Its excitement was soon tempered, however, by a high dropout rate among its initial training program participants. Its analysis revealed that 68 percent of them did not possess the baseline academic competencies their training programs require. In response, the nation initiated “Coaching,” an intensive approach to case management in which program staff work one-on-one with participants to develop and implement individualized plans to raise them to the proficiency levels necessary to tackle the programs’ academic demands. It also added tutoring to help participants master the course content and also learn how to study. And it took another, extraordinary step: it assigned staff to take the same courses as their clients to “get a bird’s eye view of what is going on,” specifically what caused failure and key success.1

This story is indicative of what NCAI has observed among effective workforce development approaches: tribal nations doing whatever it takes to help their people overcome the obstacles (see “Challenges” on page 4) that hamper their ability to complete training, get and keep a job, and build a career. But designing such “outside the box” strategies requires that tribal nations do their due diligence to understand precisely how pervasive these obstacles are among their people, how they manifest themselves in each client’s life, and how programming can be tasked to attack them.

It also demands that tribal nations not get distracted by the symptoms these obstacles produce, but instead target their root causes. For example, if a program client is routinely late for training or work, it may not be the result of poor work ethic. It may instead be due to a lack of reliable transportation, child care, or any number of other factors. Each person’s story and set of challenges is different, requiring a customized solution that empowers that person to overcome them. Consequently, tribal nations must develop flexible workforce development approaches that provide their people multiple pathways to reach their chosen career destinations at a pace they can handle. These approaches must acknowledge that for many, the challenge is not just learning how to do a specific job, but how to work – and how to live. As one workforce development practitioner explains, ultimately it’s “helping people get healthy to deal with opportunity.”2

When fashioning creative solutions that neutralize the root causes of the obstacles your people face, start small with whatever resources you can scrounge together internally and through your partnerships, and build your learned experience and a track record of success, which will then enable you to garner additional resources from your nation and elsewhere to grow that success.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

• Thinking “Assessment” (pages 22-23), is your nation gauging how particular workforce challenges impact your people? Does it collect data to track exactly how these challenges hinder particular subsets of your citizenry (single mothers, ex-cons, etc.)? How could it strengthen its ability to do so?
• Have you measured how pervasive an issue the lack of transportation is for those needing workforce education/training? For those trying to hold a job? For how many people is it a deal breaker?
• What kinds of intensive support does each client need to succeed at training and work? Coaching? Mentoring? Supplemental tutoring? Soft skills training? A combination of these and others?
• Do your workforce development programs work closely with your social service programs to triage each client and develop an individualized plan of action in partnership with that client? If not, what structures do you need to develop to ensure they do?
• For newly employed citizens, are you assessing how they are adjusting to work life? How are you supporting them in dealing with the new stresses and workplace adversity they are encountering?

INNOVATION SNAPSHOTs

Confederated Tribes of Umatilla (CTUIR)

Located in rural Oregon, CTUIR long struggled with a lack of transportation options that prevented tribal citizens from accessing local training and employment opportunities and made it difficult for reservation businesses to attract employees and customers. As one CTUIR official put it, “In some cases, it was harder for tribal members to get to the job site than to get a job or even housing.”3

In response, in 2001 CTUIR launched its own public transit and taxi voucher system that provides service to 10 neighboring towns and cities in four counties across two states. Creatively pooling dollars from various tribal, state, and federal sources, the system – called Kayak Public Transit (KPT) – runs seven free bus routes for CTUIR members and other local residents, increasing its ridership from 47,000 rides in 2008 to more than 78,000 annually today.4 Meanwhile, CTUIR employees who use the system report saving between $130 and $200 monthly (increasing household disposable income and, in turn, consumer spending at local businesses).5 By coordinating with area non-triibal transit systems and providing service to non-Natives, KPT also is fostering improved relations and good will between CTUIR and its surrounding governments.

LEARNING LINK: http://www.ncal.org/ptg/workforce-development-umatiala

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Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate (SWO)

Long saddled with deep poverty and an unemployment rate above 50 percent, SWO has come a long way in recent decades, operating two successful manufacturing companies and three casinos which, along with SWO government and the local TCU – provide nearly 1,000 jobs to SWO members and other local residents. While SWO is among the largest employers in its region, in the early years of its economic resurgence it encountered an unexpected problem – many tribal members were struggling to keep their jobs, leading to a 70% turnover rate.6 In response, key SWO government and business players came together to analyze the issue, leading to SWO’s establishment of a holistic solution called the “Developing Productive Employee”. (DPE) program. DPE equips SWO members who have lost their jobs – or are in danger of doing so with soft skills and related resources they need to succeed and grow in the workplace. Offered every three weeks, DPE’s intensive two-day training helps participants build a “toolbox” of healthy coping skills that they can use in the workplace, including “emotional intelligence,” managing stress, and “communicating for success.”7 The award-winning program has led to a decreased employment turnover rate among participants, and their decreased reliance on social service programs like TANF.8

LEARNING LINK: http://www.ncal.org/ptg/workforce-development-swo

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

• Invest in soft skills development to supplement hard skills education/training. Build partnerships with TCUs, online training providers, and others to affordably bring soft skills training to your community.
• Build training cohorts of citizens facing the same challenges to deepen their systems of support. Have successful former clients serve as role models for – and mentors to – current ones.
• Build a “coalition” partnership (see page 32) to create a tribal public transport system that enables your citizens to commute to training and work. Engage partners to relocate or expand your clients’ needed services to the reservation in order to mitigate the transportation challenge.
• Have your workforce development programs work in lockstep with your child care program and other social services to jointly identify the challenges impacting each client and neutralize them.
• Build mechanisms and partnerships to protect and build tribal citizens’ financial assets, which is proven to strengthen their ability to obtain/sustain employment. If feasible, create a low-interest loan program to insulate them against predatory lenders.